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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 KUWAIT 000195

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SUBJECT: GOK, FOREIGN LABOR ATTACHES EXCHANGE HARSH WORDS
AT IOM WORKSHOP

Classified By: Political Counselor Pete O'Donohue for reasons 1.4 b and d

¶1. (C) Summary: Kuwait's domestic worker regulations director, Kamel Al-Awadhi, upbraided the Filipino Embassy's labor attache on February 18 for not supporting Kuwait's plan for a domestic worker orientation center. The exchange marked the climax of an International Organization for Migration (IOM) workshop which brought together labor attaches, NGOs, and GOK officials for the first time. End Summary.

The IOM Workshop

¶2. (C) The IOM, in coordination with the British Embassy, hosted a February 15-19 workshop focused on the rights of foreign laborers in Kuwait and invited labor attaches, human rights NGOs, and high-level GOK officials -- groups which rarely intermingle. The workshop received significant coverage in the local Arab and English press, including a full page spread in the English-language daily Kuwait Times. The Kuwait Times spread included several interviews with labor attaches from the Philippines, Sri Lanka, and Bangladesh, each of whom provided detailed accounts of the abuses suffered by their compatriots.

GOK Plans Orientation Center for Foreign Workers

¶3. (C) Since taking office in April 2008, Brigadier Kamel Mahmoud Al-Awadhi, Kuwait's director of domestic worker regulations in the Ministry of Interior, has been planning the construction of a domestic worker orientation center to regulate entry into Kuwait of maids, cooks, and drivers from India, the Philippines, Indonesia, Sri Lanka, Egypt, and Bangladesh. During the IOM conference, Al-Awadhi noted that in November 2008 he had sent a request to the embassies of the aforementioned labor-sending countries for letters of endorsement for the domestic worker orientation center. Only Bangladesh provided him with the requested letter.

Filipino Labor Attache Confronts Al-Awadhi on Abuse

¶4. (C) In an emotionally charged exchange, Josephus Jimenez, labor attach at the Embassy of the Philippines, fired the first salvo by telling seminar participants he hoped the GOK would step up its efforts against maid abuse so that more maids could return back home without having to "return in a box," a reference to numerous well-publicized cases of maid

beatings and suicides. Jimenez, visibly frustrated with the GOK's failures to curb rampant abuse of Filipina maids, went on to question Al-Awadhi about why so little progress had yet been made on establishing the promised orientation center.

15. (C) Al-Awadhi fired back, publicly accusing Jimenez of dragging his feet on providing him with the requested letter of endorsement "for the past three months." Al-Awadhi argued that India, Kuwait's largest supplier of maids, had very few problems with the treatment of their maids or in their dealings with the GOK on the subject. He reasoned that the complaints from the maids and the embassies of the Philippines, Indonesia, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka must therefore stem from these countries, failure to properly train and instruct the "poorly-behaved" maids they send. Publicly addressing PolOff, Al-Awadhi argued that the U.S. "blacklisting" of Kuwait in its Trafficking in Persons report was unfair because the "few" cases of maid abuse among Kuwait's 600,000 foreign maids was statistically insignificant and not due to negligence by the GOK.

16. (C) Comment: Physical abuse of domestics remains an unaddressed problem and contract abuse (such as excessive hours and underpayment/nonpayment of salaries) remains widespread. GOK participation in the IOM workshop and Al-Awadhi's apparent support for reform, notwithstanding his clumsy remarks, show that the GOK's response to its labor abuse problem is slowly changing, but rapid resolution of outstanding problems is unlikely. The good news is that the dialogue between the IOM, the GOK, NGOs, and foreign embassy representatives, though contentious, was also constructive. For the first time, skeptical labor attaches and NGO workers

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were given a direct opportunity to air their grievances in a public forum and to challenge the GOK's responses. Unfortunately, while Al-Awadhi seems genuinely determined to make progress on the orientation center, he hesitated to even estimate when the facility might be completed. When pressed, he said only that he expected that by April 2009 the GOK would publish a timeline for when the center might be completed. Skeptics in the NGOs and labor-sending embassies are concerned that the often sluggish GOK will encounter further delays in the establishment of this much-needed center. End comment.

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